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Four More Years

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The following is a post-election revision of a speech delivered on October 20, 2004, on the Hillsdale campus during a Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on the topic, "Ronald Reagan and the Sesquicentennial of the Republican Party."

As we look ahead to four more years under President Bush, it would do us well to assess the last four with this question in mind: Could the Bush administration do better from a conservative and constitutional viewpoint? Let us look first at foreign policy, and then domestic policy and constitutionalism.

The Bush doctrine in foreign policy was elaborated in a series of set-piece speeches by President Bush — speeches of considerable distinction. Political scientist Jim Ceaser has pointed out in the *Public Interest* that in these speeches President Bush has restored the idea of natural rights — human rights that every human being has by virtue of being human — to a prominence in the Republican party that it hasn't enjoyed since Abraham Lincoln. Ceaser may shortchange Ronald Reagan and Calvin Coolidge, but the overall point is striking and correct. George Bush has staked a lot on natural rights or human rights and their connection to democracy in Iraq, in Afghanistan and all over the world.

But a cautionary note: There is, in President Bush's use of these ideas, a certain ambiguity or confusion between the right to be free as a person and the capacity to be free as a person. The two are not quite the same thing. Every human being has, by nature, a right to be free; but it doesn't follow that every human being has the capacity or the moral equipment — the habits of the heart and mind — to be free. The American Founders used to say, in words that George Bush now echoes, that they staked all their experiments on mankind's capacity for self-government. But the emphasis was on the word "experiments." Republican government was very difficult in the eyes of the Founders. In fact, Republican government was the *most* difficult form of government to



establish and to preserve because there was nothing to check the people. Ultimately the people are everything. There's no king or aristocracy, there's no other class in the government to correct the people's mistakes or prevent them from doing an injustice. It's up to the people themselves to regulate themselves morally. Thus even with the improvements in political science that the American Founders celebrated, they never expected republicanism to spread easily and universally across the globe. In this sense, they were students of Montesquieu, who taught that governments have to be suited to a people's character and conditions.

This of course doesn't mean that governments can't be started or founded anew. America's Founders wouldn't have been founders if they didn't think regime change was possible. Founding is possible because culture is not destiny. Thus politics can help to reshape a nation's culture. But the Founders also knew that no founding is completely *de novo*. Every founding begins from the existing habits and beliefs and religion of the people for whom you are trying to found a new regime. Thus the Founders, I think, would have been more cautious about America's ability to transform Iraqis into good democrats. In fact, the Founders actually gave some thought to the problem of Islam — as had Montesquieu, who had written avidly on Mohammedanism and the problems of the Ottoman Empire.

In our own time, we have seen in the cases of Germany and Japan after World War II that it is possible to remake Nazi institutions and Japanese imperial institutions into democratic regimes. But these are really exceptions that prove the rule that it is very difficult to pull off this kind of transformation. Germany and Japan are exceptional first because we had beaten them into complete submission. Then we occupied them for decades — not just for months or years, but for decades. And these were both civilizations that were highly developed and had enjoyed a high standard of living and of education and widespread literacy beforehand. Also, we were reorganizing them at the very time that the Cold War was beginning, so they had to choose a destiny for themselves — whether to go with the West and the democratic institutions that we were offering them, or with the East and totalitarian communist institutions.

We can get some idea of how the Founders might have thought about the problem of Iraq or Afghanistan by considering their reaction to the French Revolution. Here was an attempt to create a republican government in a society that was quite different from that of either England or English North America. It was a Catholic society in

which the people had no experience in self-government, no habits of self-government — e.g., of electing local sheriffs or town councils or magistrates — such as people in England and in the American colonies had had. John Adams, in one of his famous bursts of purple prose, wrote to Thomas Jefferson:

I was as well persuaded in my view that a project of such a government over five and twenty millions people, when four and twenty millions and five hundred thousands of them could neither write nor read, was as unnatural, irrational and impracticable as it would be over the elephants, lions, tigers, panthers, wolves, and bears in the royal menagerie at Versailles.

In other words, extremely unlikely to succeed.

Sobriety As A Conservative Principle

President Bush's rhetoric on bringing a vital democracy to Iraq seems to depend on more confidence than the Founders might have had under similar circumstances. One reason for this might be his notion that there is a kind of providential or historical support for democracy that the Founders may not have counted on. In an address on July 8, 2003, Mr. Bush said:

We know that these challenges [to democracy] can be overcome, because history moves in the direction of justice. The evils of slavery were accepted and unchanged for centuries. Yet, eventually, the human heart would not abide them. There is a voice of conscience and hope in every man and woman that will not be silenced — what Martin Luther King called “a certain kind of fire that no water could put out” . . . This untamed fire of justice continues to burn in the affairs of man, and it lights the way before us.

Now, the idea that history moves in the direction of justice is an interesting but perhaps overly optimistic reading of how slavery came to be abolished. It leaves out of account, for example, in the United States, Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Union marksmanship. It leaves aside the actual politics of anti-slavery, which did not depend — at least in Lincoln's mind — on some historical inevitability of the triumph of free labor and free men. Rather it was a very close issue, requiring all of Lincoln's genius and all of the power of the Union to solve that question for Americans.

This issue brings to mind the famous recent dispute between Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington – Huntington arguing that there will be inevitable clashes of civilizations in the world (as between, for example, Islam and Christian countries), Fukuyama arguing that history is overcoming all such cultural clashes and culminating in democracy and spreading democracy all over the world. In this argument, it seems that Bush is firmly on the side of Fukuyama – that he sees a kind of historical finger on the scale that guarantees that in the end democracy will be the final form of human government. This would not have been the view of America's Founders.

Don't get me wrong. It's a wonderful thing to hear President Bush reassert the natural rights basis of just government and, incidentally, of the Republican party. As against today's shallow culture of liberal relativism, his willingness to point out the plain difference between good and evil is bracing and recalls Ronald Reagan's denunciation of the Evil Empire. Bush's insistence on defeating this new totalitarian evil – and he calls it totalitarian – recalls Harry Truman's historic engagement of the U. S. in the long struggle of the Cold War. I worry only that in conflating the right to be free with the right to live in a fully democratic regime, Bush promises or demands too much and risks a terrible deflation of the democratic idealism he has encouraged.

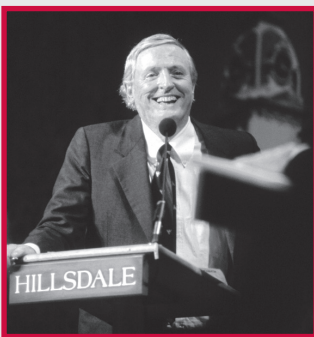
It is, of course, very heartening to see elections in Afghanistan, with thousands upon

thousands lining up to vote. But democracy is not just elections. Democracy requires that majorities accept and protect individual rights, observe due process of law, respect free speech and free exercise of religion, protect private property, observe the obligation of contracts, and many other sometimes disagreeable tasks. These tasks, in turn, require a willingness to trust one's fellow citizens that comes very hard to tribal societies who are unused to trusting anyone who is not a cousin of some sort. That's a hard thing to say, but it is true. How do you convince people who are used to trusting only members of their extended families or clans to trust strangers who, in an electoral process in a democratic system, will be voting for laws that will affect their interest? How do you get them to trust these people who are not related to them or not known to them in some intimate and familiar way? How do you introduce to them the idea of being fellow citizens?

In measuring Afghanistan's or Iraq's readiness for all this, we might consider Turkey as a more instructive example than Japan or Germany after World War II. It has taken Turkey a century to achieve the parliamentary democracy it now has. It's hard to imagine that it would take Iraq and Afghanistan any less time – and it might take them considerably more. It's also quite possible that they will never get there, though better regimes than the Taliban or Sadaam Hussein are surely attainable and are being attained. But let us not expect to transform them all at once up to the standards of the Gettysburg Address.

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Founders Campaign National Co-Chairmen Jeffrey Coors and Dan Quayle listen to a speech during the gala weekend.



Columnist and best-selling author Ann Coulter with Hillsdale College students, after delivering her Founders Campaign Gala keynote speech

Ronald Reagan and the Sesquicentennial October 17-21, 2004

Following the Founders Campaign Gala, the College's Center for Constructive Alternatives sponsored a conference to examine the history of the Republican Party – founded 150 years ago on July 6, 1854, in Jackson, Michigan – and the career and achievements of Ronald Reagan.



Martin Anderson, Ronald Reagan's senior policy advisor during the 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns, and his wife Annelise discuss Reagan's writings.

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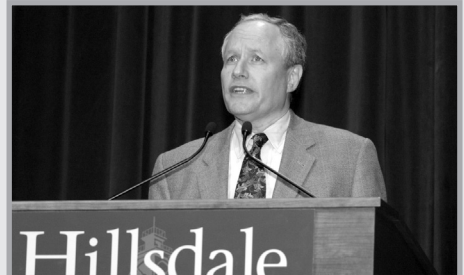
Hillsdale Distinguished Fellow Sir Martin Gilbert and President Larry P. Arnn celebrate the dedication of a Churchill statue on the Hillsdale campus.



ennial of the Republican Party



Former Reagan Attorney General Edwin Meese, who spoke about Reagan's Cold War statesmanship, with Hillsdale College sophomore Hans Zeiger



Weekly Standard editor William Kristol discusses the future direction of the Republican Party.

Natural Rights For Americans?

Now let me turn to domestic policy. President Bush is a “compassionate conservative.” On the surface, no contrast is sharper than that between his and President Reagan’s first inaugural addresses. Reagan famously proclaimed that under the present circumstances – and that qualifier was important – “Government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem.” Bush, on the other hand, could manage only to remark that “Compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government.” Gone from Bush’s address, and from his administration, has been the Reaganesque argument against big government and for smaller, limited government.

President Bush hailed a “new commitment to live out our nation’s promise through civility, courage, compassion and character.” You might call these the four Cs. But missing was the fifth C – the Constitution. I am, of course, aware of the President’s tax cuts and of his idea of an ownership society. This combines permanently lower taxes with partial privatization (though that’s a forbidden word) of Social Security and reform of education, healthcare and the tort system. In many ways, this is a farsighted agenda that Ronald Reagan would have approved. But so far, except for the tax cuts, it is a far away agenda. The only other parts of it that have been enacted are the No Child Left Behind Act and parts of the Faith Based Initiative, both of which are mixed blessings from the perspective of limited government constitutionalism. At present, the administration’s domestic legacy is sizeable increases in discretionary spending and a very expensive new Medicare entitlement for prescription drugs. These are not Reaganesque, to say the least. Admittedly, Reagan’s own record at cutting the size and cost of the federal government was not as glorious as he had wished. But at least he tried.

Bush’s fight against big government has been confined to the supply side – cutting taxes so the government won’t have as much revenue. On the demand side, the spending side, he has more or less unilaterally disarmed. His explanation of this is that Republicans lose these fights anyway, alienating voters who are tired of hearing the stale arguments between those who want the government to spend more and those who want the government to spend less. He neglects, I fear, the educational and political benefits of making the argument for limited government,

even if it’s a political loser in the short term. As Reagan knew so well, it is necessary to prepare the public mind in advance of important changes in the law. It is necessary to keep the argument for limited government alive in order to make its revival conceivable and thus politically possible, if and when circumstances become more favorable.

Right now, domestically, Bush pursues conclusions to arguments that seem to lack a major premise. He supplies the end of the argument – the policy – but he doesn’t supply very often the arguments that lead to that policy or, above all, the premise of the arguments. From tax cuts to health savings accounts, we are left wondering *why* it’s better for the federal government not to spend our money or provide our health care or interpret the Constitution promiscuously. What *is* the proper role of the federal government in all this? Thus we’re led back to constitutionalism – the missing C in Bush’s rhetoric.

Along with rhetorical disarmament in the Bush presidency has come a kind of constitutional one. Bush has not once in four years used the constitutional power of the veto. Even as commander-in-chief, he seems to take more of a managerial than a constitutional approach – e.g., asking his generals if they have enough troops rather than, as Lincoln or Churchill might have done, insisting that they take more. Even if we credit his ownership society agenda fully, I believe that he weakens the case for its ultimate passage by downplaying the premises of limited, constitutional government. To his credit, he wants to avoid the excesses of “Gingrichism” – the enthusiasm for shutting down government that struck many Americans in the mid-1990s as cavalier. It is wrong to believe that all government is oppression, that every augmentation of government is necessarily a diminution of freedom, and Bush is right in shunning that position. But it is equally wrong to believe that government is never a serious threat to freedom or, more insidiously, that as long as government is popular or has the backing of the majority of the people, it can never seriously threaten the people’s rights.

To put this point economically and in a short form: Having invested so much energy in asserting the natural rights of man and their relevance to foreign policy, where is President Bush’s concern for natural rights and their fate in domestic policy? Where is his equivalent of Ronald Reagan’s warning in his First Inaugural and elsewhere that government showed signs of having grown beyond the consent of the gov-



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erned and that a powerful elite of so-called experts threatened to usurp the people's constitutional right to rule?

This is not solely a question directed at the Bush administration. Perhaps above all, the shortcomings of Bush's first term suggest that the conservative intellectual movement – from whose wells Ronald Reagan drank deeply – still has much work to do in guiding the conservative political movement. In his own way, President Bush acknowledges this, having returned himself, thoughtfully but perhaps incompletely, to the Founders' views on natural rights in order to discern the way forward in his own foreign policy. Now it is for conservative intellectuals at Hillsdale and elsewhere to explain why the great questions of limited government do not merely or primarily involve issues of balanced budgets or intergovernmental

relations, but questions of the purposes of government as a whole. In general, one can say – again with Ronald Reagan – that the answer to these questions must begin from the premise that the source of our rights is not governments or government programs, but nature and nature's God, the ultimate grounds and limits of human government.



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